

Head Masters

Fate and an abiding affection for the product led Phil Pilgrim down a very long road...

Phil Pilgrim from Union Jack Motorcycles in Melbourne never planned on becoming one of the country's foremost classic Triumph experts, or even a mechanic. "I wanted to be a carpenter," he says. However, a bout of juvenile asthma was enough to steer him away from that path. In any case, he was headed for a trade. "I wasn't cut out for academic work," he says.

He comments wryly that the Christian Brothers school he attended probably didn't gel with his abilities. "They trained people to be, in this order, a priest, a brother, a doctor or accountant. I didn't fit any of those boxes."

With a little help from his truck driver father, he found an apprenticeship with Cotterells Garage, in suburban Melbourne. "We did everything – motorcycles, cars and trucks," he said. Evidently he had some talent for it, as he was eventually made workshop foreman, before the completion of the five-year apprenticeship.

His first bike – a 350 Triumph – turned up pretty soon after he started earning money. He couldn't ride it on the road and did, by his own admission, 680 miles in a figure of eight in a not overly large suburban back yard. "I got pretty good at it," he says ruefully, "And I worked out the

bike wasn't particularly powerful."

His next step up the motorcycle tree was an ex-police Saint, from Charlie Letch in Brunswick. "He was a lovely old guy – I bought his old shop. (This was the retail site for Union Jack for many years – Ed.) Charlie had just got a shipment of ex-police saints. So I had a look around and told Mr Letch, I'd like the one in the corner. He wasn't one of those dealers who grabbed your money and ran. It was late on a Friday and he was about to close. He said, 'Look, son, you go away and think about this and come back on Monday. It's alright, it'll be here on Monday.'

"Of course I was there first thing



Monday, pacing up and down, waiting for him to turn up.”

It cost \$640. With the addition of new riding gear, and a fresh learner permit from the Ivanhoe police station, he was on the road. Ringing in his ears was the somewhat plaintive call from his mother: “Be careful, don’t kill yourself...”

The job which really set him down his current path was as a mechanic and then workshop foreman at Frank Mussetts, then (1974) among the biggest bike shops in Melbourne. Even then Pilgrim had an interest in older bikes, in fact turning up to his job interview on a 1948 Speed Twin outfit.

They were heady times, particularly since the Meriden Triumph factory had finally started producing after an 18-month labour dispute. “Everyone wanted a Bonneville – we were taking

three or four down to the rego branch every day.

“It was a good business. They sold CZ motocrossers, Jawa speedway bikes. You worked hard and the business made money.”

By 1979, Pilgrim was getting itchy feet and headed off overseas for a trip around Europe aboard a Norton Commando. He dropped in on a lot of shops and suppliers, forming the germ of an idea to set out in business on his own. It was during this time he got the inspiration for the Union Jack Motorcycles name.

On returning home, he started off doing repairs from the back of his father’s shed. “It went well – I was saving money.” Then disaster struck, in the form of a crash while road-testing a customer’s Velocette.

A broken wrist put him out of action

for three months, and subsequently in another workshop manager’s job, this time with Absolutely Motorcycle. “That year convinced me I couldn’t do any worse out on my own,” said Phil.

Union Jack got going in 1981, in Brunswick and, soon after, Pilgrim got a call from his old employer – Frank Mussett. The latter wanted to sell out. The building was to be sold to the local council (it was later bulldozed to make way for the Brunswick library), but Pilgrim was being offered a staggering amount of spares. “It was 40 truckloads,” he says, “And we had nowhere to put it.”

Salvation came in the form of Mark Dymond from Penrite, who offered to buy all the non-Triumph gear for pretty much what Pilgrim paid for the lot. “It included Puch, Velo, Jawa, Ariel, Norton – lots of strange stuff and

lots of choice stuff,” he says.

Much of that Mussett stock is still around, as some of the lots were quirky. For example, he got 50 sets of Trident exhausts, all left-hand side. He has three left.

Over the years, Union Jack built up a reputation for being the go-to place for Meriden Triumph spares and service. Pilgrim dabbled in other brands too, such as Matchless and Royal Enfield.

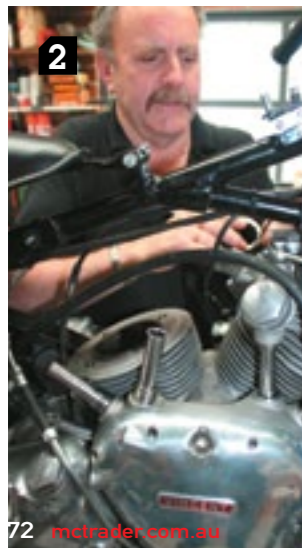
At the same time, his long-term love-affair for Vincent flourished. He’s owned a string of them and has built a number of specials including Vincatis and Vindians. More recently, he’s taken up an interest in Indians.

Realising that his business had primarily become over-the-phone parts orders, with the odd repair job thrown in, he decided to relinquish the retail shop, which is now rented out as a café. In fact, he’s come full circle and is once again



Above: Pilgrim says “Any fool can fix one [an old Triumph] if he can pull the Victa down”, but we’re not so sure! Below: Beyond his own shop, Pilgrim also has a deep knowledge of the informal worldwide Brit-bike spares network.

“Over the years, Union Jack built up a reputation for being the go-to place for Meriden Triumph spares and service.”



- 1: Pilgrim has also amassed plenty of knowledge of that rarest of beasts, the Vindian (a Vincent engine in an Indian chassis).
- 2: Pilgrim has built up a number of Vincent specials over the years.
- 3: Space is at a premium in the Union Jack premises, but Pilgrim’s intimate knowledge of his stock means he can find whatever part a customer is after – or at least know where to source it if it’s not on hand.

working out of his father's old truck shed.

Along the way he's developed his own philosophy on customer service. Once advised that he shouldn't just give away information, he's come to the opposite view.

"You have to look at your customer and realise they're not necessarily at the same skill level. So you need to look at them and explain what they need to do.

"I'll often tell them to go back and check something. A lot of shops are scared to do that. But if you give them enough information, they'll come back."

He's also a believer in filling even small orders, though they're often more trouble than they're worth. "You never know, they might come back next month, wanting all the bits for a top-end rebuild."

It seems to work. He cites examples of customers who've been coming to him for three decades and, in some cases, he's dealing with a second generation.

So after all this time, what's his advice for someone looking for a classic Triumph twin? "There are the pinnacle models from 1968, '69 and '70.

"You'll often find low-mileage examples that have been standing for years – it's not just a matter of putting fuel in and starting them. You've got to overhaul them. The

bearings will have rotted and they will blow up.

"People spend a lot of time worrying about matching numbers. They have this idea that there was a little man who hand-scraped the engine, carefully fitting it to its frame.

"Man, I went to the factory. There were two assembly lines. They had engines going down one line and frames down the other. A big Brummie of a bloke would grab any random engine and fit it to the frame. They didn't get a frame number until the bike was sold. It was a sales tax thing. The bike was allocated, then it got a frame number.

"They were literally thrown in – it's irrelevant, really. Just get a good bike.

"Do a lot of reading – a lot of bits get interchanged. Make sure you know what you're looking at. I once came across a unit construction with an old pre-unit cast iron top end on it. It was about as desirable as a second-hand condom. That would be hard to sell.

"There are lots of factions: rigid, pre unit, pre oil in frame. All claim they were the last 'proper' Triumph made.

"They aren't overly reliable but they're easy to repair and everything is available at a reasonable price. Any fool can fix one, if he can pull the Victa down.

"Any later 1960s machine (and on) handles and stops reasonably well. It's a good package. It's light and, if it's in reasonable tune, it starts in the first couple of kicks. They're nimble and the controls are light. If you're looking at a classic bike, it would have to be on the shopping list."

Pilgrim is as good as his word, keeping a much-treasured 1969 model in his workshop.

Union Jack Motorcycles offers a nationwide parts service. It's on the web at www.unionjack.com.au or you can contact the shop direct on (03) 9499 6428. ■

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Above: Need classic Brit bike spares? You've come to the right place! Right: Phil has an encyclopaedic knowledge of old British hardware, and, best of all, he's only too happy to share it with fellow aficionados.

